

# Tony Coelho

1942–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1979–1989

DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

Departing from his original plan to become a Catholic priest, Tony Coelho instead dedicated himself to a political career, first as a staffer and then as a Member of the U.S. House of Representatives. During his six terms in office, Coelho led a push to revive the Democratic Party's fundraising abilities and became the first Hispanic American to attain a top-tier leadership position as Majority Whip. Coelho was unabashedly partisan, even by the standards of an already partisan age. "You know, politics reminds me of driving a car," he once remarked. "You put it in D and you go forward. You put it in R and you go backward."<sup>1</sup>

Anthony Lee (Tony) Coelho was born June 15, 1942, in Los Banos, California. His parents, Otto and Alice Branco Coelho, were the children of Portuguese immigrants.<sup>2</sup> As a teenager, Tony Coelho had an accident on his parents' dairy farm that caused him to black out sporadically for the rest of his life. Coelho attended the public schools in Dos Palos, California, before graduating from Loyola University in Los Angeles in 1964. Intent on attending law school, he changed his plans after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, believing that the priesthood encapsulated Kennedy's vision of public service. But his plans were derailed when he learned on his 22nd birthday that his blackouts were caused by epilepsy. At the time, epileptics were barred from the priesthood.<sup>3</sup>

After suffering a bout of depression, Coelho worked briefly for comedian Bob Hope, who encouraged him to pursue a career in politics. A Jesuit acquaintance introduced Coelho to Hope, for whom Coelho did odd jobs. Coelho also lived for a while with the Hope family. Hope enjoyed nighttime drives on Los Angeles-area freeways and often took Coelho along for company. Hope once suggested that Coelho should work for a Congressman. "It's obvious that you have this burn to help

people," Hope said. "If that's your bag, why don't you go work for a member of Congress?" Coelho sent his résumé and a letter of introduction to Congressman Bernie Sisk, whose district encompassed Coelho's hometown and much of the San Joachin Valley.<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter, Coelho began working as an intern in Representative Sisk's office. In June 1967, Coelho married Phyllis Butler, a legislative aide to Indiana Representative Andrew Jacobs. The couple raised two daughters, Nicole and Kristen.<sup>5</sup>

Sisk was an influential Democratic member of the California delegation with a decade of experience in the House when Coelho joined his staff in 1965. He held a post on the powerful Rules Committee and was a serious contender for Majority Leader in 1971.<sup>6</sup> An expert on Western water politics, Sisk directed millions of federal dollars to irrigation projects that helped establish central California as an ideal location for agricultural business. Moreover, as a native Texan who moved with his young family to California during the Great Depression, Sisk was popular with the Southern Members, who ruled the House at the time. He was particularly close to the Texas delegation—allowing Coelho, as a senior staffer, to establish important relationships with the group, notably with Representative Jim Wright from the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. In an era when the California and Texas delegations vied for influence in the House, Coelho was often on the outs with an alliance of California Democrats headed by one of the most skilled and powerful Members in the House, Phil Burton of San Francisco.<sup>7</sup>

For 14 years, Coelho worked his way up the ladder in Sisk's office. By 1970 he was Sisk's administrative assistant, the equivalent of a present-day chief of staff. He was also staff director of the Subcommittee on Cotton of the House Agriculture Committee, a consultant for the House Parking Committee, and a staff coordinator for the



House Rules Committee's Subcommittee on Broadcasting. Coelho enjoyed a filial relationship with Sisk, who shared with him many of the eccentricities of the House and its Members. At one time Sisk chaired a three-man panel that assigned Members parking spaces while Coelho handled administrative duties. Coelho was astonished when he found out that a senior Texas member who was a close friend to his boss had routinely complained to the Speaker because Sisk had a more desirable spot than he did. Coelho considered the problem petty but informed Sisk, who immediately yielded the spot, saying, "You don't understand. Parking spaces are important." Coelho learned that such gestures, deference, and small favors cemented loyalty and turned the wheels of legislation.<sup>8</sup>

Sisk's district encompassed one of the most fertile stretches of farmland in the country, extending northward from the outskirts of Fresno to include Merced, Turlock, and at its far northern extreme, Modesto. More than 200 different crops were cultivated there, including cotton, grapes, walnuts, and peaches. The district's population was mixed; about one-fifth were Mexican Americans, and an equal number had roots in the South. Like Sisk, many of the residents were from families that had journeyed to the region during the Dust Bowl years. A growing population of Hmong refugees from Laos was centered in Merced. Over time, as the Central Valley leaned Republican, Coelho's district remained Democratic, though it was more conservative than coastal California on many social issues.

In 1978, by the time Sisk announced his decision to retire at the end of the 101st Congress (1989–1991), he had already chosen Coelho as his successor. Coelho had left his Washington post shortly beforehand to manage Sisk's district office and had forged strong political ties in the area.<sup>9</sup> Vincent Lavery, his only opponent in the Democratic primary, was a teacher from Fresno who had been defeated twice while seeking the party's nomination in the district. Coelho handily dispatched him, with 79 percent of the vote. In the general election, Coelho faced Chris Patterakis, a local celebrity and a former stunt pilot for the Air Force Thunderbirds. Coelho's epilepsy became a campaign issue. Describing Coelho as "a very sick man,"

Patterakis asked a crowd, "What would you think if Coelho went to the White House to argue a critical issue for you and he had a seizure?" Asked by the press for a response, Coelho quipped, "A lot of people have gone to the White House and had fits. At least I'd have an excuse." A Modesto native, Patterakis carried the district's largest city, but Coelho benefited from a two to one Democratic registration advantage and from his ties to the popular incumbent. Ultimately, Coelho prevailed in the bulk of the district and won the election, 60 to 40 percent.<sup>10</sup> According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Coelho's victory made him the first Portuguese American to serve in Congress.<sup>11</sup> In his subsequent five re-election campaigns, Coelho faced no serious challenges, winning between 64 and 72 percent of the vote.<sup>12</sup>

Coelho earned assignments on the Agriculture Committee and the Veterans' Affairs Committee.<sup>13</sup> The first panel was vital for his constituency, and he took over Sisk's role as the caretaker of the district's farming interests. He held several important subcommittee seats, including the Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry Subcommittee, which he chaired in the 99th Congress (1985–1987), and the Cotton, Rice, and Sugar Subcommittee. Also in the 99th Congress, Coelho earned a seat on the House Administration Committee, allowing him to influence election and campaign legislation. In his second term, he traded his Veterans' Affairs assignment for a seat on the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee and gained a critical spot on the panel's Subcommittee on Water and Power Resources, allowing him to monitor water and irrigation issues that were vital to the agriculture industry in the Central Valley. The industry was supported largely by government-sponsored public works projects that pumped water into the otherwise barren region.<sup>14</sup>

With the retirement of most of the other senior Representatives in California's Central Valley in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Coelho emerged as the defender of the region's large agribusiness sector. Early on, the battle lines were drawn around access to water, pitting Coelho against Democrat George Miller, who represented California's 7th Congressional District, to

the northwest. Nearly a million acre-feet of water flowed through Miller's district into the valley's Westlands region. In the 1970s, small farmers backed by Representative Miller and supported by the James Earl (Jimmy) Carter administration sought to enforce a 1902 law that had been largely ignored, limiting the use of federally subsidized water to farmers who worked land in parcels of 160 acres or less. The large-scale agribusinesses in the San Joaquin Valley deemed this requirement unworkable, and Coelho sought to relax the requirements. Supported by a majority of the committee, he orchestrated a compromise with Representative Miller: Owners would pay higher fees but would qualify for federal water regardless of the size of their landholdings.<sup>15</sup>

Coelho's primary focus was to strengthen congressional Democrats' campaign fundraising capabilities. As a freshman Representative, he sold more tickets to the party's annual fundraising dinner than any other House Member. He then built up a considerable war chest for his 1980 re-election effort, and when his Republican challenger conceded the contest, Coelho used the money to fund other Democrats' campaigns. In 1981, at the start of his second term, party leaders selected Coelho to be chairman of the moribund Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), whose purpose was to raise funds and provide strategy for House Democratic candidates. Coelho was only the second junior Member ever tapped to lead the DCCC (the first was Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas).<sup>16</sup> Coelho proved to be an excellent fundraiser; he had the ability to work a crowd and speak to the issues. Under his chairmanship, the DCCC was revived from an organization that was nearly bankrupt—outfunded 10 to 1 by Republicans—to a robust financing machine that helped propel Democrats to victory in 1982 and enabled them to retain their House majority throughout the Reagan presidency.<sup>17</sup> "We won the battle of the '80s," Coelho boasted. "They [Republicans] were determined they were going to take the House on Reagan's coattails. We have, in effect, destroyed the Reagan impact."<sup>18</sup>

In 1985 Coelho joined the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) after having been denied admission for

unspecified reasons.<sup>19</sup> When reapplying for admission, Coelho emphasized his Portuguese roots and insisted that since Portugal is situated on the Iberian Peninsula (named Hispania by the Romans) many Europeans consider it a Hispanic country. "The dictionary definition of Hispanics includes those from the Iberian Peninsula," Coelho maintained.<sup>20</sup> Coelho's admission to the caucus, the first for a Portuguese American, provided the group with several benefits: his prodigious fundraising; his influential spot on the Agriculture Committee, which could be helpful for immigration measures to protect migrant farm workers; and his district's constituency, which was roughly one-fifth Hispanic.<sup>21</sup>

Many new Democratic Representatives looked to Coelho for support in their campaigns, and those who were elected to the House were indebted to him. In 1987 Coelho tapped into this growing network in an effort to ascend the leadership ladder. He succeeded Thomas Foley of Washington as Democratic Whip, handily winning a vote in the caucus to defeat Charles Rangel of New York and W. G. (Bill) Hefner of North Carolina. This was the first time the No. 3 Democratic leader was elected, rather than appointed.<sup>22</sup> With his election, Coelho became the first Hispanic American in House history to serve in a top party leadership post. Coelho's easy embrace of big-time donations left some observers ill at ease.<sup>23</sup> But Coelho maintained that his work was on the level. "I solve people's problems because I like to solve people's problems," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "What people are used to in politics are people who deal under the table. I do things out in the open. I am an open book."<sup>24</sup>

The most significant piece of legislation Coelho sponsored was the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which he introduced in the House on May 9, 1989. "The Americans with Disabilities Act provides a clear, comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities. This mandate is urgently needed by our Nation's 43 million disabled citizens," he stressed.<sup>25</sup> His passion for this legislation stemmed from his experiences as an epileptic and from witnessing discriminatory behavior toward other



epileptics. “My epilepsy is what makes me tick,” he said.<sup>26</sup> “Discriminatory attitudes hold that you can’t employ someone with epilepsy because they may have a seizure on the job, when today the overwhelming majority of people with epilepsy have their physical conditions under control through medication.”<sup>27</sup> The act passed the House in May 1990 and was signed into law on July 26 of that year.

Though Coelho excelled at fundraising as chairman of the DCCC, some were uneasy about his financial dealings. *Newsweek* published a story alleging that Coelho had violated House Rules and federal law through his interactions with a savings and loan bank in Texas. The allegations focused on Coelho’s use of a yacht he had borrowed from the bank, far exceeding the monetary limit set by House Rules and the contribution limit for federal political action committees. He was also criticized for failing to report a \$100,000 junk bond on his financial disclosure forms. After the U.S. Department of Justice initiated an investigation, Coelho determined in May 1989 to resign from the House.<sup>28</sup> “I don’t intend to put my party through more turmoil,” he said. “And, more importantly, I don’t intend to put my family through more turmoil.”<sup>29</sup> On June 15, his 47th birthday, Coelho delivered his farewell address to the House. “The generosity of my constituents, and the good will of my colleagues, have enabled me to serve for 25 years: as a staffer, as a Member, as campaign chair, and as majority whip ... I thank my colleagues for their friendship, hard work, and dedication to this great country.”<sup>30</sup>

After leaving the House, Coelho worked as the head of the American mission to the 1998 Exposition in Lisbon, Portugal. He then managed Vice President Al Gore’s 2000 presidential bid, resigning on June 15, 2000. Coelho later served as chairman of the Board of Directors of the Epilepsy Foundation.<sup>31</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, “Tony Coelho,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

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## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

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*Oral History*: United States Capitol Historical Society Oral History Collection, 1976–1991, 13 items. Interviewees include Tony Coelho.

## NOTES

- 1 Bob Sectar, “Tony Coelho’s Dramatic Rise Means a New Style in Democratic Leadership and New Clout for the California Delegation,” 11 January 1987, *Los Angeles Times*: 10.
- 2 Linda Greenhouse, “Anthony L. Coelho,” 9 December 1986, *New York Times*: B17.
- 3 Carmen E. Enciso and Tracy North, *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–1995* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1995): 19; Mark Grossman, *Political Corruption in America: An Encyclopedia of Scandals, Power, and Greed*, vol. 1 (New York: Grey House Publishing, 2008): 84; Sectar, “Tony Coelho’s Dramatic Rise Means a New Style.”
- 4 Betty Cuniberti, “Epileptic Congressman Finds a New Ministry,” 21 November 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: G1; Ruth Shalit, “The Undertaker: Tony Coelho and the Death of the Democrats,” *The New Republic* (2 January 1995): 17.
- 5 Cuniberti, “Epileptic Congressman Finds a New Ministry”; Shalit, “The Undertaker: Tony Coelho and the Death of the Democrats.”
- 6 For more on Sisk’s career, see B. F. Sisk, *A Congressional Record: The Memoir of Bernie Sisk* (Fresno, CA: Panorama West, 1980); and Robert L. Peabody, *Leadership in Congress: Stability, Succession, and Change* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976): 190–204.
- 7 Brooks Jackson, *Honest Graft: Big Money and the American Political Process* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988): 31–40; Peabody, *Leadership in Congress: Stability, Succession, and Change*: 190–204.
- 8 Jackson, *Honest Graft: Big Money and the American Political Process*: 46–47.
- 9 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1989): 141.
- 10 David Hoffman, “Rep. Coelho: Democrats’ Fund-Raiser Extraordinaire,” 26 August 1982, *Washington Post*: A2; Ellen Hume, “Central Valley Farmers Face a New Game,” 1 June 1978, *Los Angeles Times*: SD3; *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1981): 120.
- 11 Ellen Hume, “11 New Congressmen in State: 3 Incumbents Lose, 25% of Delegation Replaced,” 9 November 1978, *Los Angeles Times*: B21.
- 12 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 13 For a full listing of Coelho’s committee assignments, see Garrison

- Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947–1992*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1994): 175–176.
- 14 *Congressional Directory, 97th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981): 295.
  - 15 Hoffman, “Rep. Coelho: Democrats’ Fund-Raiser Extraordinaire”; *Almanac of American Politics, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Barone & Company, 1981): 119.
  - 16 *Politics in America, 1982*: 119.
  - 17 *Almanac of American Politics, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, 1989): 118; Helen Dewar and Edward Walsh, “Arkansas Rep. Anthony Succeeds Coelho as Chief Democratic Fund-Raiser,” *Washington Post*, 30 January 1987: A4.
  - 18 Sectar, “Tony Coelho’s Dramatic Rise Means a New Style in Democratic Leadership and New Clout for the California Delegation.”
  - 19 Marjorie Hunter and Warren Weaver, Jr., “Washington Talk—Briefing: Señor Coelho,” 25 March 1985, *New York Times*: A12.
  - 20 Kenneth Weiss, No Title, 15 April 1985, States News Service.
  - 21 Hunter and Weaver, “Washington Talk—Briefing: Señor Coelho.”
  - 22 *Politics in America, 1990*: 139.
  - 23 Ellen Hume, “Freewheeling Rep. Coelho Rising Fast,” 29 September 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: B3. “He’s such a power broker, and he kind of shows off with it,” noted a lobbyist. “He’s got one foot in the fast lane and one on a banana peel. If he’s not careful, he’ll take a big fall.”
  - 24 Hume, “Freewheeling Rep. Coelho Rising Fast.”
  - 25 *Congressional Record*, House, 100th Cong., 1st sess. (9 May 1989): 8714.
  - 26 Sectar, “Tony Coelho’s Dramatic Rise Means a New Style in Democratic Leadership.”
  - 27 *Congressional Record*, House, 100th Cong., 1st sess. (9 May 1989): 8712.
  - 28 Grossman, *Political Corruption in America*: 85; David LaGesse, “Politicians Flew on Planes of Texas Thrift That Collapsed,” 18 June 1987, *The American Banker*.
  - 29 Michael Oreskes, “Coelho to Resign His Seat in House in Face of Inquiry—The No. 3 Democrat: In Surprising Decision He Speaks of Sparing His Party Turmoil,” 27 May 1989, *New York Times*: 1.
  - 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 1st sess. (15 June 1989): 11952. See also Robert Shepard, “Coelho Says Goodbye to the House,” 15 June 1989, United Press International; Steven Komarow, “Saying Goodbye to Congress with a Speech and a Bash,” 15 June 1989, Associated Press.
  - 31 Grossman, *Political Corruption in America*: 85–86.